



systematic

graphophonem

phone

foan

phonics

instruction



phonics instruction

Phonics instruction teaches children the relationships between the letters (graphemes) of written language and the individual sounds (phonemes) of spoken language. It teaches children to use these relationships to read and write words. Teachers of reading and publishers of programs of beginning reading instruction sometimes use different labels to describe these relationships, including the following:

- **graphophonemic relationships**
- **letter-sound associations**
- **letter-sound correspondences**
- **sound-symbol correspondences**
- **sound-spellings**

Regardless of the label, the goal of phonics instruction is to help children learn and use the alphabetic principle—the understanding that there are systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds. Knowing these relationships will help children recognize familiar words accurately and automatically, and “decode” new words. In short, knowledge of the alphabetic principle contributes greatly to children’s ability to read words both in isolation and in connected text.

Critics of phonics instruction argue that English spellings are too irregular for phonics instruction to really help children learn to read words. The point is, however, that phonics instruction teaches children a system for remembering how to read words. Once children learn, for example, that **phone** is spelled this way rather than **foan**, their memory helps them to read, spell, and recognize the word instantly and more accurately than they could read **foan**. The same process is true for all irregularly spelled words. Most of these words contain some regular letter-sound relationships that can help children remember how to read them. In summary, the alphabetic system is a mnemonic device that supports our memory for specific words.

What does scientifically based research tell us about phonics instruction?

Key findings from the scientific research on phonics instruction include the following conclusions of particular interest and value to classroom teachers:

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is more effective than non-systematic or no phonics instruction.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction makes a bigger contribution to children's growth in reading than instruction that provides non-systematic or no phonics instruction.

How do systematic programs of phonics instruction differ from non-systematic programs? The hallmark of programs of systematic phonics instruction is the direct teaching of a set of letter-sound relationships in a clearly defined sequence. The set includes the major sound/spelling relationships of both consonants and vowels.

The programs also provide materials that give children substantial practice in applying knowledge of these relationships as they read and write. These materials include books or stories that contain a large number of words that children can decode by using the letter-sound relationships they have learned and are learning. The programs also might provide children with opportunities to spell words and to write their own stories with the letter-sound relationships they are learning.

Approaches to phonics instruction

Most teachers are acquainted with several approaches to phonics instruction, including those listed below. The distinctions between approaches are not absolute, and some programs of instruction combine approaches.

Synthetic phonics Children learn how to convert letters or letter combinations into sounds, and then how to blend the sounds together to form recognizable words.

Analytic phonics Children learn to analyze letter-sound relationships in previously learned words. They do not pronounce sounds in isolation.

Analogy-based phonics Children learn to use parts of word families they know to identify words they don't know that have similar parts.

Phonics through spelling Children learn to segment words into phonemes and to make words by writing letters for phonemes.

Embedded phonics Children are taught letter-sound relationships during the reading of connected text. (Since children encounter different letter-sound relationships as they read, this approach is not systematic or explicit.)

Onset-rime phonics instruction Children learn to identify the sound of the letter or letters before the first vowel (the onset) in a one-syllable word and the sound of the remaining part of the word (the rime).

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves kindergarten and first-grade children's word recognition and spelling.

Systematic phonics instruction produces the greatest impact on children's reading achievement when it begins in kindergarten or first grade.

Both kindergarten and first-grade children who receive systematic phonics instruction are better at reading and spelling words than kindergarten and first-grade children who do not receive systematic instruction.

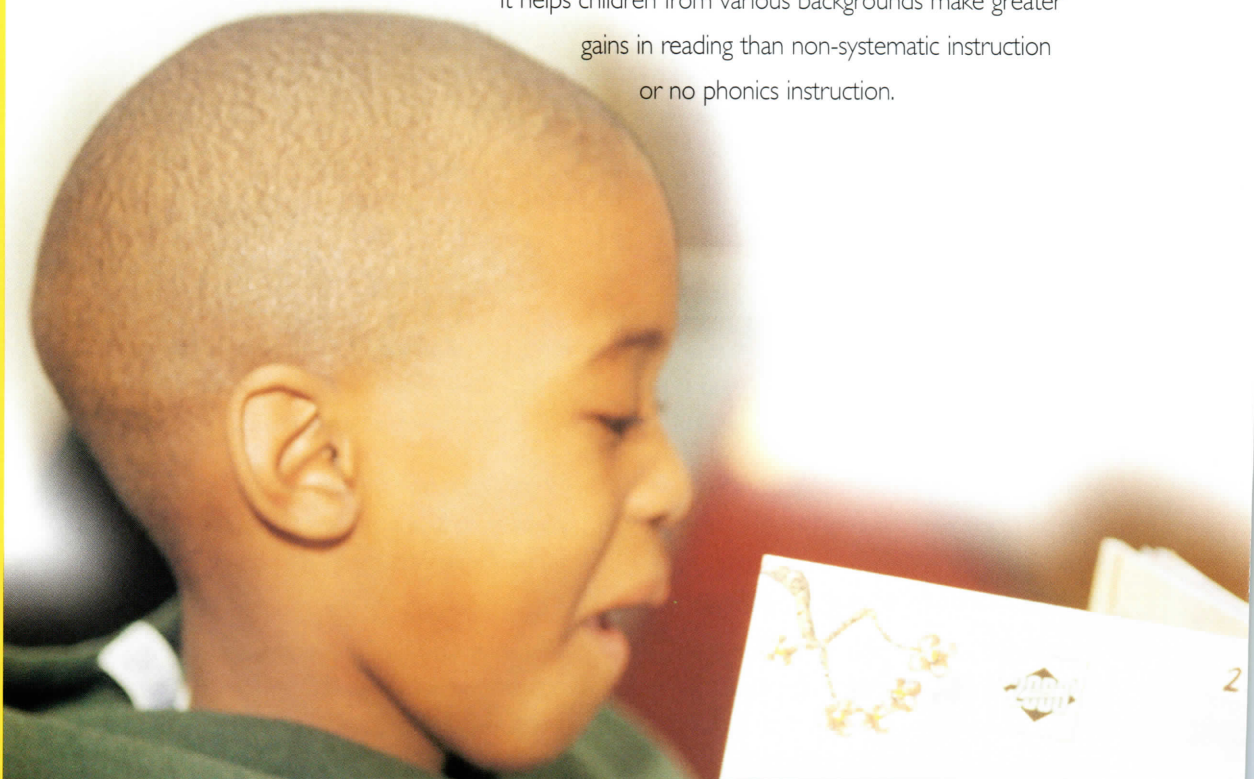
Systematic and explicit phonics instruction significantly improves children's reading comprehension.

Systematic phonics instruction results in better growth in children's ability to comprehend what they read than non-systematic or no phonics instruction. This is not surprising because the ability to read the words in a text accurately and quickly is highly related to successful reading comprehension.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is effective for children from various social and economic levels.

Systematic phonics instruction is beneficial to children regardless of their socioeconomic status.

It helps children from various backgrounds make greater gains in reading than non-systematic instruction or no phonics instruction.



Programs of systematic and explicit phonics instruction

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction provides practice with letter-sound relationships in a predetermined sequence. Children learn to use these relationships to decode words that contain them.



Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is particularly beneficial for children who are having difficulty learning to read and who are at risk for developing future reading problems.

Systematic phonics instruction is significantly more effective than non-systematic or no phonics instruction in helping to prevent reading difficulties among at-risk students and in helping children overcome reading difficulties.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction is most effective when introduced early.

Phonics instruction is most effective when it begins in kindergarten or first grade. To be effective with young learners, systematic instruction must be designed appropriately and taught carefully. It should include teaching letter shapes and names, phonemic awareness, and all major letter-sound relationships. It should ensure that all children learn these skills. As instruction proceeds, children should be taught to use this knowledge to read and write words.

Phonics instruction is not an entire reading program for beginning readers.

Along with phonics instruction, young children should be solidifying their knowledge of the alphabet, engaging in phonemic awareness activities, and listening to stories and informational texts read aloud to them. They also should be reading texts (both out loud and silently), and writing letters, words, messages, and stories.

Questions you may have about phonics instruction

Do we know enough about the effectiveness of systematic and explicit phonics instruction for me to implement it in my classroom?

Yes. Many teachers are teaching phonics systematically and explicitly and have been doing so for years. Their results, along with the findings of three decades of research, confirm the importance and effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction, particularly in kindergarten and first- and second-grade classrooms.

How can I tell if a phonics program is systematic and explicit?

A program of systematic phonics instruction clearly identifies a carefully selected and useful set of letter-sound relationships and then organizes the introduction of these relationships into a logical instructional sequence. The instructional sequence may include the relationships between the sounds associated with single letters (for example, the sound /m/ with the letter **m**), as well as with larger units of written language (for example, letter combinations such as **th** or **ing** or spelling patterns such as **ea** or **ie**). Furthermore, a systematic program of instruction provides children with ample opportunities to practice the relationships they are learning.

What do non-systematic programs of phonics instruction look like?

Programs of phonics instruction that are not systematic do not teach consonant and vowel letter-sound relationships in a prescribed sequence. Rather, they encourage informal phonics instruction based on the teacher's perceptions of what students need to learn and when they need to learn it.

General guidelines

Evaluating programs of phonics instruction

Effective programs offer phonics instruction that:

- helps teachers explicitly and systematically instruct students in how to relate letters and sounds, how to break spoken words into sounds, and how to blend sounds to form words;
- helps students understand why they are learning the relationships between letters and sounds;
- helps students apply their knowledge of phonics as they read words, sentences, and text;
- helps students apply what they learn about sounds and letters to their own writing;
- can be adapted to the needs of individual students, based on assessment;
- includes alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, and the reading of text, as well as systematic phonics instruction.

Non-systematic instruction often neglects vowels, even though knowing vowel letter-sound relationships is a crucial part of knowing the alphabetic system. Non-systematic programs of phonics instruction do not provide practice materials that offer children the opportunity to apply what they are learning about letter-sound relationships. The reading materials these programs do provide for children are selected according to other criteria, such as their interest to children or their literary value.

What else should I look for in programs of phonics instruction?

Programs should acknowledge that systematic phonics instruction is a means to an end. Some phonics programs focus primarily on teaching children a large number of letter-sound relationships. These programs often do not allot enough instructional time to help children learn how to put this knowledge to use in reading actual words, sentences, and texts. Although children need to be taught the major consonant and vowel letter-sound relationships, they also need ample reading and writing activities that allow them to practice using this knowledge.

What kinds of reading practice materials should I look for?

Usually, practice materials are in the form of short books or stories that contain words that provide children with practice in using the specific letter-sound relationships they are learning. Most programs of systematic phonics instruction also include materials for use in practicing writing. For example, children might have activity sheets on which they write the letters and letter combinations they are learning, and then combine these into words, sentences, messages, and their own stories.

Is phonics instruction more effective when students are taught individually, in small groups, or in whole classes?

You can teach phonics effectively to the whole class, to small groups, or to individual students.

The needs of the students in your class and the number of adults working with them determine how you deliver instruction.

Non-systematic programs

Non-systematic programs of phonics instruction

Some programs of instruction do not teach phonics explicitly and systematically.

- **Literature-based programs** that emphasize reading and writing activities. Phonics instruction is embedded in these activities, but letter-sound relationships are taught incidentally, usually based on key letters that appear in student reading materials.
- **Basal reading programs** that focus on whole-word or meaning-based activities. These programs pay only limited attention to letter-sound relationships and provide little or no instruction in how to blend letters to pronounce words.
- **Sight-word programs** that begin by teaching children a sight-word reading vocabulary of from 50 to 100 words. Only after they learn to read these words do children receive instruction in the alphabetic principle.

Further, adding phonics workbooks or phonics activities to these programs of instruction has not been effective. Such “add-ons” confuse rather than help children to read.

Doesn't phonics instruction get in the way of reading comprehension?

Quite the opposite is true. Because systematic phonics instruction helps children learn to identify words, it increases their ability to comprehend what they read. Reading words accurately and automatically enables children to focus on the meaning of text. The research is quite convincing in showing that phonics instruction contributes to comprehension skills rather than inhibiting them.

Does phonics instruction slow down the progress of some children?

Again, the opposite is true. Phonics instruction contributes to growth in the reading of most children. It is important, however, to acknowledge that children vary greatly in the knowledge of reading that they bring to school. For phonics instruction to support the reading progress of all of your students, it is important to work in flexible instructional groups and to pace instruction to maximize student progress.

How does systematic and explicit phonics instruction affect spelling?

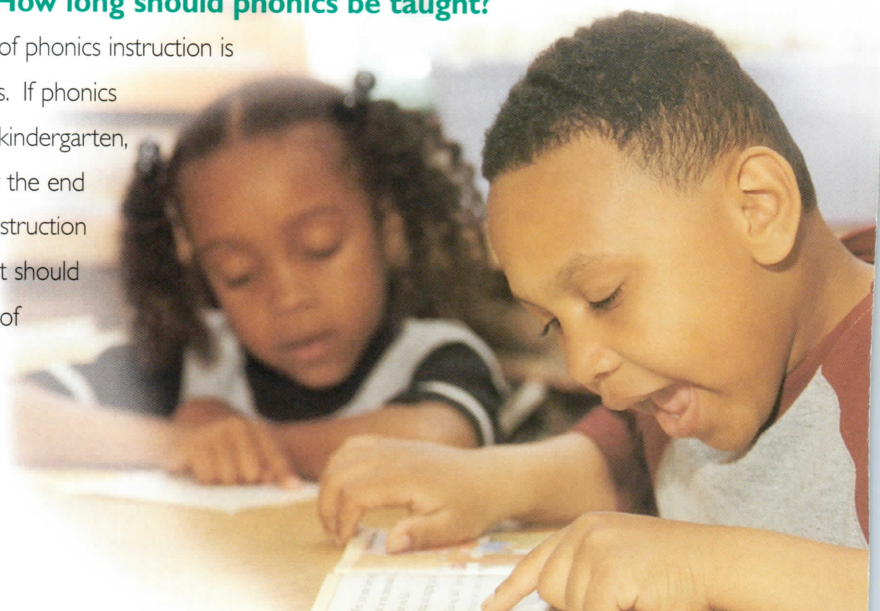
Systematic programs of phonics instruction produce more growth in spelling among kindergarten and first-grade students than non-systematic or no phonics programs. However, systematic phonics instruction for normally developing and poor readers above first grade does not produce gains in spelling. The reason may be that as students move up in the grades, spelling is less a matter of applying letter-sound relationships and more a matter of combining word parts.

How does systematic and explicit phonics instruction affect the reading and spelling of older students?

Systematic phonics instruction by itself may not be enough to significantly improve the overall reading and spelling performance of readers beyond first grade. The effects of phonics instruction on students in second through sixth grades are limited to improving their word reading and oral text reading skills. The effects do not extend to spelling and reading comprehension. For these students, it is important to emphasize reading fluency and comprehension. In addition, these students also require explicit spelling instruction to improve their spelling.

How long should phonics be taught?

Approximately two years of phonics instruction is sufficient for most students. If phonics instruction begins early in kindergarten, it should be completed by the end of first grade. If phonics instruction begins early in first grade, it should be completed by the end of second grade.



Summing up

Phonics instruction

- helps children learn the relationships between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language.

Phonics instruction is important because

- it leads to an understanding of the alphabetic principle—the systematic and predictable relationships between written letters and spoken sounds.

Programs of phonics instruction are effective when they are

- **systematic**—the plan of instruction includes a carefully selected set of letter-sound relationships that are organized into a logical sequence.
- **explicit**—the programs provide teachers with precise directions for the teaching of these relationships.

Effective phonics programs provide

- ample opportunities for children to apply what they are learning about letters and sounds to the reading of words, sentences, and stories.

Systematic and explicit phonics instruction

- significantly improves children's word recognition, spelling, and reading comprehension.
- is most effective when it begins in kindergarten or first grade.

